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U.S. nuclear strength held equal to Soviet's

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Washington—Far from lagging behind the Soviet Union in strategic nuclear forces, Representative Les Aspin (D., Wis.) says, the United States has kept abreast through a series of little-publicized technological advances and has done so at a fraction of Moscow's costs.

Mr. Aspin, a member of the House Armed Services and Intelligence committees, issued a comprehensive study designed to rebut critics of SALT II and other defense policies who claim the U.S. has stood still while the Soviet Union marched ahead in nuclear strength.

While Moscow invested tens of billions of dollars in new intercontinental missiles, the study said, the U.S. Defense Department steadily and economically improved the accuracy, power and safety from attack of existing American missiles.

The result, Mr. Aspin contended, is that the effectiveness of U.S. forces has kept pace. "Contrary to the claims of many doom-sayers in the business of defense analysis, we have hardly been engaging in 'unilateral restraint' or 'unilateral disarmament,'" he said.

Mr. Aspin especially emphasized the growth in the ability of American missile warheads to knock out Soviet missiles in underground silos and other "hardened" military targets. The contrary point—increasing Soviet ability to knock out U.S. missiles—is the one most argued by critics of SALT and defense policy.

Mr. Aspin contended the United States has made just as "dramatic" advances as the Soviet Union over the last decade. This situation would continue, he said, into the mid-1980's—that is, during the life of the new strategic arms limitation treaty.

Using Central Intelligence Agency estimates of Soviet missile costs and Pentagon data on U.S. outlays, Mr. Aspin said the Soviet Union would have spent \$24.9 billion by 1985 on 820 SS-17, SS-18 and SS-19 missiles with multiple warheads while the United States would have spent \$1.15 billion on new guidance systems and warheads for its current 550 Minuteman 3 missiles.

The American outlay will have been less than 5 per cent of the Russian. But Mr. Aspin, using "latest intelligence estimates" on warhead power and accuracy, calculated that the American weapons would have substantially the same ability to knock out missile silos as the SS-18 and SS-19 and much greater ability than the SS-17.

The U.S. capability against Soviet missile forces was attributed to two developments.

First, Minuteman 3 missiles have been equipped with a new guidance system which will deliver their three warheads within 600 feet of their targets. This increased the probability of knocking out a target from a former 19 per cent to a current 55 per cent, compared with a present 59 per cent for SS-18 and SS-19 warheads.

Second, 300 of the Minuteman missiles will be fitted over the next two years with 335-kiloton warheads, with nearly double the explosive force of current models. (One kiloton is the equivalent of 1,000 tons of TNT.) When this is done, Mr. Aspin said, the probability of killing a Soviet target, will go up to 70 per cent for a Minuteman warhead.

Both sides, he estimated, will continue improvements into the mid-1980's, so that there will be an 83 per cent probability for U.S. warheads and 82 per cent for Russians.

Mr. Aspin readily acknowledged that the Russians will have more warheads on their land-based missiles than the Americans will have on theirs. To him that simply meant the Soviet Union would have far more nuclear explosives than there is any need for, because they would exceed numbers needed to destroy all U.S. underground missiles. It was implicit in his calculation that each side would have the other deterred from going to war.

With some irony, however, he went on to remark that construction of the new MX missile to move among many possible launch points "will make the superfluous Soviet warheads useful again."

Mr. Aspin granted that the eventual vulnerability of the Minuteman would require some means other than underground silos for basing missiles.

The point that he stressed in his study was that the Pentagon has so strengthened the blast-resistance of Minuteman silos in a program just completed that it has delayed for at least six years the time when Soviet rockets will be numerous and powerful enough to knock them out. That program cost \$1.4 billion, again a fraction of Russian outlays.

The Aspin study was equally optimistic about improvements being made in bomber forces carrying air-launched cruise missiles and in submarine-launched missiles which will have more powerful and accurate warheads to offset a decline in numbers in the 1980's.

"The Soviets spend more money and build brand new systems. We spend much less and improve existing systems, but the result has been about the same," the congressman said. "Our improvements have not been as showy but have been just as effective."

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